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A Next Wave of Welfare Reform

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Earlier this year, President Trump signed Executive Order 13828, which directs federal agencies to reform welfare programs with key goals to move more able-bodied adults from welfare to work, crack down on welfare fraud, and preserve resources for the truly needy.¹ But this executive order is just one vehicle for reform.

In April, the House Committee on Agriculture released the 2018 Farm Bill.² While the U.S. Farm Bill is popularly associated with policies like environmental conservation, forestry, water quality,

agricultural subsidies and usually invokes images of tractors and hay bails, a large portion of the bill deals with reforms to one of America's largest welfare programs, the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) commonly known as food stamps.

The 2018 Farm Bill calls for an expansion of work requirements for most able-bodied middle-aged adults and commonsense reforms that build on successful state-led reforms. It marks a next step in a national discussion of welfare reform.

A Short History of Welfare Reform

In 1996, a Republican-led Congress passed significant welfare reform that President Bill Clinton signed into law. These reforms made it possible for states to fix their broken welfare systems and help more people out of poverty.

Most consider the 1996 reform a success. The combination of work requirements and time limits helped to move millions of able-bodied adults from dependency to self-sufficiency, and preserve resources for the truly needy. While the 1996 law made major changes to cash welfare, the changes to the food stamp program were less robust.

When the food stamp program was first implemented nationally in the 1970s, just one in 50 Americans participated.³ Today, according to the Congressional Budget Office, one in seven Americans receives SNAP benefits, with a total number of 44 million enrolled in assistance.⁴ Much of this growth is being driven not by individuals with disabilities, children, or seniors, but by able-bodied adults.

Work requirements have been part of the SNAP program at various times since its inception, recognizing the mental and financial health benefits of holding a job.

However, one of the biggest problems with SNAP and the reason it grew so quickly during the recent recession is the lack of any requirement that recipients actively seek employment. Before 2009, recipients were required to work or participate in a work-training program in order to receive long-term benefits, but many states waived those requirements between 2009 and 2010, including the state of Florida. In January 2016, Florida reinstated work requirements for able-bodied adults. The 2018 Farm Bill

would limit the 33 other states still waiving work requirements for snap enrollees.

Ordinarily, low-income able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 to 50, who do not have children, are limited to receiving food stamps for only three months in a three-year period, unless they fulfill work requirements, which entail employment or participating in a training or workfare program for at least 20 hours a week. In the past, states have used loopholes in the way of waivers and weaker eligibility requirements to keep as many able-bodied adults on the program. More than a third of the nation lives in an area where work requirements are waived by their state legislatures, despite record-low employment. Nevertheless, an estimated 13 million able-bodied adults on food stamps do not work at all.⁵ The 2018 Farm Bill would limit waivers to areas with unemployment rates above seven percent.

When then-President Clinton signed the 1996 “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act” (PRWORA) into law, he and Congress vowed to “end welfare as we know it.” Today’s program has strayed from the original design of welfare being a program to help the neediest among us.

The State of Florida is facing one of the most pivotal elections in history. With a new governor, new cabinet, three new Florida Supreme Court justices, and new members of the state’s legislature, Florida can continue to lead the nation in welfare reform. With the passage of the 2018 Farm Bill, Florida needs to prioritize the provision of assistance for the truly needy and move more able-bodied adults from government dependency to self-sufficiency. However, without specific policies protecting work

requirements and waiver limits within the Farm Bill, policymakers would be able to revert to prior policy paths that trapped Floridians in generational poverty.

The Importance of Work

Many of us know from personal experience in our youth that a first job is an effective starting point where the “soft skills” are learned: punctual attendance, taking direction, getting along with co-workers. Not only does work develop family well-being economically by providing a stable source of income and the opportunity to acquire assets, but it also builds self-esteem, develops social relationships, cultivates role models for children, and encourages relationships of respect among adults and between adults and children. It creates a path to higher wages and is a key to a productive and prosperous life.

States facing a poverty challenge are learning that work has the power to change lives.

Successful States are Leading the Discussion

At the time when Maine Governor Paul LePage assumed office in 2011, one in three people living in the state of Maine were enrolled in some sort of welfare program.⁶ To address this crisis, in October 2014 Maine started requiring about 16,000 able-bodied childless adults to work, train, or volunteer on at least a part-time basis in order to continue receiving food stamps. Adults who refused to comply with the new state requirements would cycle off the state’s welfare rolls after three months of receiving benefits.

After implementing these reforms,

Maine quickly moved thousands of adults out of government dependency. By January 2015, the number of able-bodied adults on food stamps had dropped to 4,500 and has continued to decline.⁷ Maine ranked first in the nation in 2014 for its decline in food-stamp dependency, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Federal Nutrition Service. Today, only 1,500 able-bodied childless adults rely on food stamps in Maine –a tremendous accomplishment. Not only has Maine reduced the number of welfare enrollees, but the recent welfare reforms have led to greater employment, higher earnings, and less dependency, according to a report published by the Maine Department of Health and Human Services and the Maine Office of Policy and Management.⁸

As additional states begin to implement similar reforms, more and more success stories will rise to the surface and millions of Americans across the country will be better off for it.

The Time for Welfare Reform is Now

There has never been a better time for welfare reform than today. The current unemployment rate is a full percentage point lower than when Clinton signed the 1996 reforms into law and employers are eager to fill open positions with workers. According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, nearly three-quarters of the job openings that will occur over the next decade require a high-school education or less.⁹ Nearly four out of five job openings require no training or less than a month’s training on-the-job, while 87 percent require no prior experience.

Built on state-led successes to move more people out of poverty and into self-

sufficiency, the reforms included in the 2018 Farm Bill refocus the system on the truly needy by prioritizing work for able-bodied adults. The bill calls for an expansion of work requirements for most able-bodied adults. If passed, the new work requirements for SNAP recipients would require that adults between the ages of 18 and 59 work or enroll in a training program at least 20 hours per week. People who are disabled, pregnant or caring for a child under the age of 6 would be exempt.

The 2018 Farm Bill aims to help work-capable adults receiving SNAP gain employment to improve their quality of life.

The intent of government assistance should aim to temporarily support Americans living in poverty and help them move into the mainstream economy. State waivers to SNAP work requirements were meant to be used during tough economic times, not during a booming economy.

Americans anywhere on the political spectrum want to help lift people out of poverty, but some allow their ideological commitments to stand in the way of proven solutions and progress. Only when people of all political persuasions look past their predetermined notions, and toward the well-supported facts about which

- 1 The White House. Executive Order Reducing Poverty in America by Promoting Opportunity and Economic Mobility. 10 April 2018. 16 May 2018 <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-reducing-poverty-america-promoting-opportunity-economic-mobility/>>.
- 2 Agriculture, The U.S. House Committee on. The 2018 Farm Bill . 10 April 2018 . 16 May 2018 <<https://agriculture.house.gov/farmbill/default.aspx>>.
- 3 United States Department of Agriculture- Food and Nutrition Service. A Short History of SNAP. 28 November 2017. 16 May 2018 <<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>>.
- 4 United States Department of Agriculture- Food and Nutrition Service. SNAP Tables. 5 May 2018. 16 May 2018 <<https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>>.
- 5 Foundation for Government Accountability . "The Case for Expanding Food Stamp Work Requirements to Parents ." 15 Feb 2018 . thefga.org. 16 May 2018 <<https://thefga.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/The-case-for-expanding-food-stamp-work-requirements-to-parents.pdf>>.
- 6 The Maine Heritage Policy Center . The Welfare Program Maine's Dependency Crisis . 1 January 2018. 16 May 2018 <<http://mainepolicy.org/issues/fixing-welfare/the-welfare-problem/>>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Management, Maine Department of Health and Human Services and the Maine Office of Policy and. Maine Department of Health and Human Services and the Maine Office of Policy and Management. 1 Jan 2016. 16 May 2018 <http://www.maine.gov/economist/econdemo/ABAWD%20analysis_final.pdf>.
- 9 United States Department of Labor- Bureau of Labor and Statistics. Occupational employment projections to 2022. 1 December 2013. 16 May 2018 <<https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2013/article/occupational-employment-projections-to-2022.htm>>.